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SUBJECT: UAE SHI'A AND THEIR LOYALTIES

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[1](#)B. 05 ABU DHABI 2815

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Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: With rising international tension over Iran's quest for nuclear power, and persistent reports of Iranian influence in Iraq's internal affairs, the UAE's Shi'a minority have been doing a lot of soul-searching, according to sect members and their acquaintances. While we have heard no official concern that the indigenous Shi'a community poses a security risk, there are anecdotes suggesting Emirati Shi'a do face some discrimination because of the sect to which they belong. Asked about their loyalties, Emirati Shi'a are likely to respond that they are spiritually loyal to the Shi'a teachers/mullahs in Iran, and politically loyal to the UAE and its government. End Summary.

Emirati Shi'a and Their Loyalties

[1](#)2. (C) Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's recent warnings about Iran's influence in Arab countries and his observation that "Shiites are mostly always loyal to Iran and not the countries where they live," did not ring true in the UAE, where Sunnis and Shi'a have long lived side-by-side in relative harmony. "This is a misconception," said Fatima al-Sayegh, an academic and a Shi'a. "We are not loyal to Iran whatsoever. We are not loyal to any foreign government whatsoever," she told Pol chief. "(The UAE) is the land my father and grandfathers have lived in for over 200 years." She conceded that Emirati Shi'a such as herself take their spiritual guidance from the holy city of Qom, Iran. (Note: Not all Emirati Shi'a look to Qom for spiritual guidance; others look to Grand Ayatollahs in Najaf, Iraq, as "sources of emulation." End Note.) The negative publicity surrounding Iran and its role in the region has caused some Shi'a to do a lot of soul-searching. Al-Sayegh told us that in her discussions with other Shi'a, she found that they lamented what they saw as Iran's unwelcome ambitions to acquire nuclear power and spread its influence across the Gulf region.

[1](#)3. (C) Academic and human rights activist Mohamed Ghobash told us that Shi'a allegiances are not uniform throughout the UAE. The more affluent and educated Emirati Shi'a are more likely to see themselves as Emiratis first and Shi'a second, according to Ghobash, adding that the opposite is also true, especially in the poorer northern emirates, where an Emirati's Shi'a identity is more important than national identity. Ghobash opined that there is generally very little resentment of Iran among Emirati Shi'a, and in fact the

majority of Emirati Shi'a feel tied to Iran through their Shi'a beliefs.

14. (C) An Emirati Shi'a from the northern emirate of Sharjah professed to be a loyal Emirati first and a Shi'a second. He told Pol/Econoff that many of the Shi'a, whose family roots were in Iran, still look to Iran's clergy for guidance rather than the UAE government. Most of them prominently displayed photos of the Ayatollahs in their houses, but not photos of UAE leaders. Thus, in his opinion, the UAEG is justified in being suspicious of Shi'a loyalties in the UAE.

UAEG Attitude Toward UAE Shi'a

15. (C) Events in the Arabian Gulf in recent years, especially those involving Iran, have affected everyone's lives to one degree or another in the UAE. At the leadership level, Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed has made clear his aversion to Iranian-backed Iraqi Shi'a leaders, telling CENTCOM Commander General Abizaid March 27, "I don't think the Sunnis will accept" a new government led by Ibrahim al-Ja'afari, who "is on (Tehran's) payroll."

16. (C) Whatever misgivings the UAE leadership and the Emirati Muslim population may have about Iran, at the local level, Sunni-Shi'a relations are generally harmonious. Ahmed al-Kindi, an assistant under secretary for Islamic Affairs at the Ministry of Justice, downplayed any differences between Sunnis and Shi'a. "We are all brothers," he told Pol chief. "The Shi'a say they are happy here," al-Kindi said. Muslims co-exist peacefully in the UAE, al-Kindi continued, citing government assistance in financing and maintaining Shi'a mosques, supporting Shi'a religious celebrations, and meeting Shi'a economic and social needs. Senior officials from the Islamic Affairs Department attend Shi'a celebrations to demonstrate religious tolerance. Hessa al-Khalidi, a Sunni

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and an advisor to the widow of the late UAE President Sheikh Zayed, told Pol assistant that the Emirati Shi'a are generally wealthy and their commercial interests "keep them satisfied" and away from political activism.

17. (C) Al-Sayegh and others we know in the Shi'a community echoed these sentiments. Many Shi'a are scrupulous about contrasting their comfortable situation in the UAE with the difficulties fellow Shi'a experience in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. Indeed, we have never heard the UAE leadership say anything to us suggesting they are wary of the Shi'a living in the UAE. (Note: Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed is fond of sharing his generally negative views about Islamic extremists and the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as his efforts to prevent these groups from gaining a foothold in the UAE. End Note.) The federal government's unified Friday sermons are distributed to Sunni and Shi'a mosques alike, but the Shi'a preachers are not bound to use the sermons the way their Sunni counterparts are. The Daira al-Awqaf al-Jafariya in Dubai (Endowments Department) issues prayer guidance to Shi'a preachers. Shi'a preachers in the UAE discuss spiritual themes that are different from those of their Sunni counterparts. When it comes to social and political concerns in Friday sermons, the preaching in Sunni and Shi'a mosques is the same, al-Sayegh said.

Demographic Survey of the Shi'a in the UAE

18. (U) Although demographic data on religious affiliation has not been collected in a decade, it is estimated that the vast majority of the UAE's estimated 800,000 citizens are Muslims, with approximately 85 percent belonging to the Sunni sect and the remaining 15 percent Shi'a (mostly Shi'a Twelvers or "Ithnasheri" who recognize 12 imams). While their exact numbers are not known, many UAE nationals who are Shi'a trace their family heritage to Ahwaz in Iran's Khuzistan province.

The UAE's total population (citizens and non-citizens) reached 4.3 million in 2004 (ref A). (Note: The recently completed population census did not ask respondents about their religious affiliation, so the results the UAEG is expected to release any day now will not tell us anything about how the UAE's Shi'a minority might have changed in 10 years. End Note.)

¶9. (U) What we have reported in the International Religious Freedom report in the past, and what our interlocutors confirm to be the case nowadays, is that the Shi'a are concentrated in the northern emirates, and they are free to worship in, and maintain, their own mosques. All Shi'a mosques (and 5 percent of Sunni mosques) are considered private, unlike the majority of Sunni mosques. Moreover, Shi'a imams are government-appointed only in the Emirate of Dubai, whereas all Sunni imams are government-appointed. The largest non-Emirati Shi'a populations in the UAE are from India and Pakistan (mostly Shi'a Ismailis), according to government estimates. An estimated 250,000 Iranians reside in the UAE, including more than 150,000 in Dubai alone (ref B). In Dubai, Shi'a Muslims may pursue Shi'a family law cases through a special Shi'a council rather than the Shari'a courts. Shi'a parents with children in government schools do their best to reconcile the Sunni-based Islamic studies curriculum and their own Shi'a beliefs either by "correcting" at home what their children learn at school, or by taking their children to Jafari schools on Thursdays.

Shi'a Face Some Discrimination

¶10. (S/NF) About the only sour note we hear from Emirati Shi'a is that they face some employment discrimination, particularly in the armed forces and in the diplomatic corps.

(Note: It is also our understanding that the federal State Security Department only hires Sunni Emiratis. End Note.) The UAE Air Force prohibits Shi'a from becoming pilots, and those Shi'a who do pursue military careers, are barred from sensitive or key positions. "Not every position is open to us," al-Sayegh said, recalling anecdotes about relatives and friends who tried to enlist in the military. The response from the military was a simple, "We will call you."

¶11. (C) In other sectors, the Shi'a do not face discrimination. A Dubai Shi'a contact told CG Pol assistant that employment and business opportunities have steadily improved for the Shi'a after the late Dubai Ruler Sheikh Rashid al-Maktoum died in 1990. Indeed, businesses owned by Shi'a families like al-Fardan, al-Sayegh, Galadari, and Habib al-Yousuf, have flourished in Dubai in recent years. This

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same contact said that the Shi'a are now looked at simply as "Ajam" (a word referring to all locals of Persian origin, the vast majority of them Sunni Arabs).

¶12. (U) While some of our Shi'a contacts insist that their identity is a non-issue, the fact is, the Shi'a still mostly marry within their sect, and they generally welcome the long-standing Dubai government practice of grouping the Shi'a population in certain neighborhoods (i.e., al-Jaflyia or al-Quoz). Rather than viewing this "ghettoization" as a form of prejudice, our contacts say it allows their community to maintain their social ties. "It is intended to keep the identity of the society," said al-Sayegh.

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